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ABSTRACT

Findings from a study on the factors of parental involvement in public education are presented in this paper. Methodology involved school office observations and informal interviews with parents and teachers in one high school, six elementary schools, and three middle schools. Findings indicate that most parents are deterred from involvement in their children's schools because of feelings of inadequacy, prior negative associations with and perceptions of the school, and administrator and teacher attitudes toward parents. A conclusion is that most parents want to be involved, but are inhibited by school practices and administrative/staff perceptions of parents. (18 references) (LMI)

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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS: RELUCTANT PARTICIPANTS ≠ UNINTERESTED PARENTS

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Abstract

School effectiveness studies have shown parental involvement to be an essential component of an "effective" school. While many educators claim to desire parental participation in the schools, parents do not perceive an invitation to become an ingredient in the educational processes of their children's education. Parents do not sense they are wanted at school. An overall feeling of inadequacy deters most parental involvement. Upon initial contact with the school, many parents are so overwhelmed with the elitism they encounter that they do not contact the school unless the school contacts them. There seems to be also a traditional reputation that parents, like students, are not "called to the office" unless there is or has been a problem. Therefore, communication with the school has a negative insinuation. Educators give a pre-conceived invitation to parental participation. While invoking parents to become a part of the school setting, educators are willing to assign merely passive roles in parental participation, contrary to the desires of parents interviewed in this study.

Parental Involvement In Schools:
Reluctant Participants ≠ Uninterested Parents

Introduction

School climate and school structure are not conducive to parental propinquity. (Midwinter, 1977; Lightfoot, 1978; Penetito, 1981). Schools administered with white, middle-class, patriarchal values tend to make comfortable those parents with white, middle-class, patriarchal values. However, parents whose values are not congruent with those embraced by white, middle-class, patriarchal value-laden educational institutions feel less than comfortable in these schools; therefore, they maintain minimal involvement with these schools.

Heretofore, the majority of research concerning parental involvement has been mostly quantitative (Espinoza, 1983; Maloy & Seldin, 1983; Williams, 1984; Miller, 1986; Epstein, 1984 & 1986; Chavkin, 1987 & 1989; Haynes, 1989; Melnick & Feine, 1989). And while certainly contributing to the knowledge about parental participation in education, this research is

simultaneously limiting. Data from a survey conducted among school personnel and parents indicate parents have a definite idea about how they want to participate or to become involved in schools; however, their interests do not coincide with the desired roles educators would have them fill. Parents feel that they themselves are not trained enough to make decisions about school. The data also indicated that parents felt that teachers were too busy to become involved with parental participation at school. Educator respondents indicated that they did not feel parents had a direct impact on their children's academic success. Parents should be involved in parent organizations such as PTA or a "booster" association, but parents should not be involved in any real decision making processes, according to the educators in this quantitative data collection (Williams, 1984). (This notion is echoed by E. D. Hirsch except that Hirsch would probably advocate the participation of literate middle-class parents since the "literate national culture" is school-transmitted, i.e. white, middle-class, patriarchal culture rather than home-transmitted [Hirsch, 1987] .)

While the quantitative research cited seems to provide adequate information to begin to answer (or at least to ponder) the question concerning how educators see parents' roles in participation and/or how parents see parents' roles in participation, the research is inadequate in providing the reader of the research with clear descriptions of the subjects in the survey. Socioeconomically, who are they? Racially and ethnically, what is their identity? What is their gender? A weakness with the quantitative research on parental participation is that participants and/or non-participants are not described; they are given no identity except that of a quantitative one (i.e. 001). In a struggle for enlightenment, we as educators might characterize public school parents in order to examine why those parents who do participate do so, and to examine why there is little participation among other parents.

In spite of possibly conflicting perceptions about the actual role(s) of parents' involvement in schools,

educators maintain parents should have a part in the educational process (Maloy & Seldin, 1983; McLaughlin & Shields, 1987; Halderson, 1987; Gottfredson & Stewart, 1989; Haynes, 1989). And although educators may convey the importance of parental roles in the educational process (the parental roles determined by educators themselves), many parents are still reluctant to become an integral component of the educative milieu. When parents repeatedly experience disinterest or disapproval, much like students who experience disinterest or disapproval, they become reluctant to associate with the school. Reluctant participants are not uninterested parents though.

An ethnographic study of involvement among Maori parents in New Zealand shows that parents were reluctant to get involved in "activities officially sanctioned by the school" (Penetito, 1981). However, once the school showed interest in the community and the Maori tradition, and invited the parents to become a part of the educational process in the way the parents so desired, Maori parents felt they had something to contribute and became more involved. Initially the teachers and

principal wanted Maori to serve in formal functions, i.e. PTA president, school board committee, organization liaison. That was not the desire of the Maori parents. They did not feel comfortable serving in these formal capacities. One teacher indicated that the more informal the activity, event, etc, the more likely Maori parents would be to attend or to participate. "Parental participation rose in direct proportion to the school's interest in the community" (Penetito, 1981).

Why which parents or what kind of parents are involved or are reluctant to become involved in public education is the essence of this research. WASP values have become intrinsically characteristic of the foundation of public education. Parents who embrace values other than these often feel awkward in their encounters with the school and its personnel. Information obtained through parental interviews, teacher interviews, and school office observations will elaborate on these deductions.

Method

This project employed an ethnographic approach. Initially informal interviews were conducted with parents of upper and lower elementary, middle school, and high school. The parents, both mothers and fathers, were from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. The socioeconomic strata was somewhat diverse; the lowest income earner was a student in undergraduate school, and the highest was an engineer; the others fell somewhere along the continuum. Interviews were conducted over the phone, in my apartment, in their homes, and at various neutral sites (coffee house, pub, etc.).

Teacher respondents included African-American and white respondents; all were female and employed in the public school system. The setting for the teacher interviews was very similar to the setting for the parent interviews. It was very informal. In fact, the interviews really appeared to be no more than conversation between 2 educators. I told them I might use what they had said in a paper, and they quite readily agreed.

The school observations were done rather sporadically. I went to one high school, six elementary schools, and three middle schools. The consensus of the community was that the high school is very elite. (It was a magnet school.) Three elementary schools were rural; one was suburban; two were urban. One middle school was suburban; two were suburban-urban. My role was that of a graduate student in Administration and Supervision whose program required some observing in the public schools. Although office personnel were curious, no one seemed to notice me after I had been there for a while.

Results and Discussion

The interviews provided much insight. Some respondents indicated that they did not feel comfortable at their child's/children's school. A married upper middle class white female told me she felt extremely comfortable at her children's school, a 90% white neighborhood school administered by a white female.

One respondent was enrolled in graduate classes and went to her child's school to observe in her child's class.

> The teacher and the principal agreed to let me observe. I had felt really pretty comfortable (at school) before the experience. But, afterwards, I wasn't comfortable at all. However, it certainly provided me with an understanding that I had not had before. The school was so strict it was unbelievable! No wonder Margaret (her daughter) got a 'Mr. Sad Face' daily. She's a grouch when she gets home, and I don't blame her!

Apart from just her overall displeasure with the school climate, this respondent voiced her concern with how antagonistic the office staff was when not only she would come into the office, but when the children came into the office as well.

Another respondent, Anne, a white female who was recently separated from her husband in a small town, was supporting her two sons on $500.00 a month child support and attending undergraduate school in elementary education. She wanted to discuss with her son's teacher the recent changes that were occurring at home.

> I wrote Ms. X a note and set up what I thought was an informal appointment. I mean, after all we had been friends--her husband and my husband, and, well, you know what I mean. Anyway, when I got to school, I thought I would meet her in her classroom. Well, we had the conference in the principal's office. I didn't know what was going on. The principal did most of the talking. Said I should stay of my son's

affairs since he was in the fifth grade now. He could adjust well enough on his own. I guess he thought I needed some guidance since I didn't have a man at home to do that for me anymore! God, I was furious when I left there. In fact I'm still mad! I'll be damned if bake cupcakes for anything at that school again!"

Anne's child's school was a rural one; the administrator was a middle-aged WASP male; the teacher was a young WASP female.

Another interview I conducted was with a married black female who had been having some problems with her second grader academically. Alecia (the daughter) went to a predominantly elementary school that I have labeled suburban-urban. A black male was the principal. A black female was Alecia's teacher.

> I visited the school often. I don't work outside the home in the daytime, so I could really go and know just what I could with Alecia, you know. Everyone was really helpful to me. That's how Alecia passed on to 2nd grade for next year."

Alecia's mother did not feel threatened, nor did she feel intimidated because she did not have the formal training of an educator. However, the school was willing to let participate in a manner in which she wanted to participate, in a manner in which she felt comfortable participating, not in a role in which the school wanted

her to play.

Agnes is an Italian immigrant. She is pursuing an alternate certification program so that she may become a foreign language teacher. She is proficient in four languages; she is married; she is the mother of three children; and she is in a middle class socio-economic status.

> I've never been contacted by my children's school. However, when my sixth grader brought home a "C" instead of her usual A's and B's, I thought I should talk to the teacher to see what I could do, or to see what I had failed to do. My daughter's "C" was in English; therefore, I made an appointment with the English teacher, naturally. She was very antagonistic. She told me my daughter had chosen to make the grade she had, and that it was not bothering anyone but me (Agnes). I reiterated the fact that I was there seeking her advice as a professional educator about what I as a parent could do. She said there was very little I could do, especially since we spoke languages other than English at home.

Mike is a parent who shares custody of his seven year old son and his five year old daughter with his children's mother. The children stay with Mike for six months and with their mother for six months.

> You know even when I have the kids, the school still calls Judy (the children's mother). Maybe it's not a big deal to them, but it is to me. I sometimes feel ostracized even though I am the custodial parent. I've volunteered to help with

> field trips--my job is certainly flexible enough--but I'm never asked. Don't get me wrong. I'm never mistreated so to speak; it's just I kind of get the feeling I'm more or less forgotten about. You know, I'm a single male parent. I guess there aren't too many of us around!

Annette's son is always in conflict with his teachers and with the administration. Annette says she's never once gotten any good news from school. All of her contact with her son's school has had negative connotations. Annette is black, living on public assistance, and is married but living apart from her husband. Annette's son's school is on of the suburban-urban middle schools I observed. The principal is a middle-class white young female; the assistant principal (who is in charge of discipline, thus the major contact person for Annette) is a middle-class black male.

The teacher interviews were not as diverse. Respondents indicated that they considered parents who did not get involved as uncaring or disinterested parents. This research, as well as previous research, shows that to be untrue. Parents want to be involved in their children's education, but how they see themselves

involved is conflicting with how the school sees their involvement.

The observations of the schools' front offices were the most fascinating of all the research I conducted. School personnel were almost rude at times to parents who dressed casually (i.e. jeans and t-shirt) or who were not familiar with school procedure. However, for the parents who the personnel had clearly dealt with before (i.e. PTA parents, booster parents) or who were dressed more formally (i.e. professionally), school personnel were much more friendly and helpful.

Conclusion

When schools begin to include parents in roles parents feel comfortable participating in, schools will have more parental participation. And while educators agree that parental involvement is important, they themselves are the ones who inhibit it. If schools are to employ successful parental participation programs, then they should get in touch with the community and the

culture in which these parents and students live. Otherwise, parents will maintain the attitude that schools do not want their participation; teachers will continue to believe that parents who are uninvolved are uninterested; and students will fail to associate the school knowledge with lived knowledge.

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